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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000745

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TAGS: PREL PGOV QA EG JO

SUBJECT: AL-JAZEERA COMMENTARY ON JORDANIAN MONARCHY
TOUCHES A RAW NERVE

REF: A. AMMAN 147
B. 08 AMMAN 3122

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The airing of a highly critical two-part series about the Jordanian monarchy on the Al-Jazeera historical commentary show "With Haykal" has resulted in a flurry of press commentary questioning presenter Mohammed Haykal's character and condemning the lack of a robust defense of the monarchy. The state is under pressure from the Jordanian political elite to respond and may do so by downgrading or canceling its representation at the upcoming Arab League summit in Doha. End Summary.

Lighting a Fire

¶2. (SBU) "With Haykal," an Al-Jazeera show featuring historical commentary by veteran Egyptian journalist Mohammed Haykal, stirred up great ire with its recent focus on Jordan. The March 12 and 19 editions of the show focused on the Jordanian monarchy from the era starting with World War I through the end of King Hussein's reign in 1999. During both shows, Haykal repeatedly portrayed Jordan (and in particular King Hussein) as overly supportive of American and Israeli policy to the detriment of the Arab cause.

¶3. (SBU) Haykal theorized that recent kings of Jordan have fallen prey to a "complex" in which they aspire to leadership of the Arab world based on their Hashemite roots. At the same time, he noted that Jordanian leaders have always sought relationships with Israel and the United States, even when those relationships compromised Arab political positions. Haykal claimed that King Hussein received a million dollars annually from the CIA, and sought to ensure support from Israel through secret back-channel political deals. Assessing Jordan's role in the region, Haykal said that the country was created in an "artificial way" as a "buffer zone" between Israel and the rest of the Arab world.

Media Reaction

¶4. (SBU) Haykal's assessment of the Jordanian monarchy touched off a firestorm of condemnation from media outlets and the government. Press commentary questioned Haykal's character and the professionalism of Al-Jazeera rather than the substance of the accusations. In particular, it pointed out that Haykal's role as an advisor to the Egyptian regime in 1967 hardly made him a neutral source. Al-Dustour, a partially government-owned paper, suggested that Haykal (who is 86-years-old) has Alzheimer's disease. Other columnists criticized the relative silence of Jordan's political elite towards Haykal and demanded "stronger facts" that could be used to contradict his accusations. Several commentators linked Haykal's statements to recent diplomatic rows between Jordan and Qatar, including Jordan's decision not to attend a Qatar-organized summit in the midst of the Gaza crisis (Ref

A).

¶15. (SBU) Al-Jazeera program director Arif Hijawi appeared on air on March 23 to refute the accusation that Haykal's program was linked to current political developments and asserted that Haykal's views on Jordan were already well known before the current controversy. Hijawi denied that any official objection was received from Jordan regarding the content of "With Haykal" and hinted that freedom of speech would overrule such an objection at any rate.

Official Reaction

¶16. (SBU) Official public reaction from the Jordanian government has so far been muted. While the government-owned press has published several articles and commentaries critical of Haykal, the only high level response from the government came from Interior Minister Nayef Al-Qadi, who said on the margins of a March 18 press conference that Haykal "propagates lies".

¶17. (C) The Jordanian government is under considerable pressure to respond to Haykal, Al-Jazeera, and their Qatari government sponsors, according to Ambassador's interlocutors.

Royal Court Chief Nasser Al-Lozi said he had received many phone calls on the issue from members of Jordan's political elite demanding the closure of Al-Jazeera's Amman bureau. In the interval between the two shows, Lozi repeatedly reached out to Qatari officials by phone in an attempt to tone down Haykal's criticism but was brushed off. He also attempted unsuccessfully to enlist Syrian help in persuading Al-Jazeera

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to back down.

¶18. (C) Comment: The most likely Jordanian response to the Haykal incident may be a downgrading of Jordan's representation at an upcoming Arab League summit in Qatar. Comments by Lozi and FM Nasser Judeh to the Ambassador indicate that the King and government officials are looking for other international meetings which they could attend in lieu of the Arab League Summit to serve as a cover for lower level attendance. Jordan is also carefully monitoring Egypt's planning. If Egypt decides to downgrade its delegation or not attend at all for reasons unrelated to Haykal, Jordan will likely follow with a similar course. A decision on the Arab League summit will probably be announced at the last minute to minimize the ability of Qatar to respond critically. End Comment.

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Beecroft